

Understanding Milestones

Why Understanding Teen Brain Development Matters

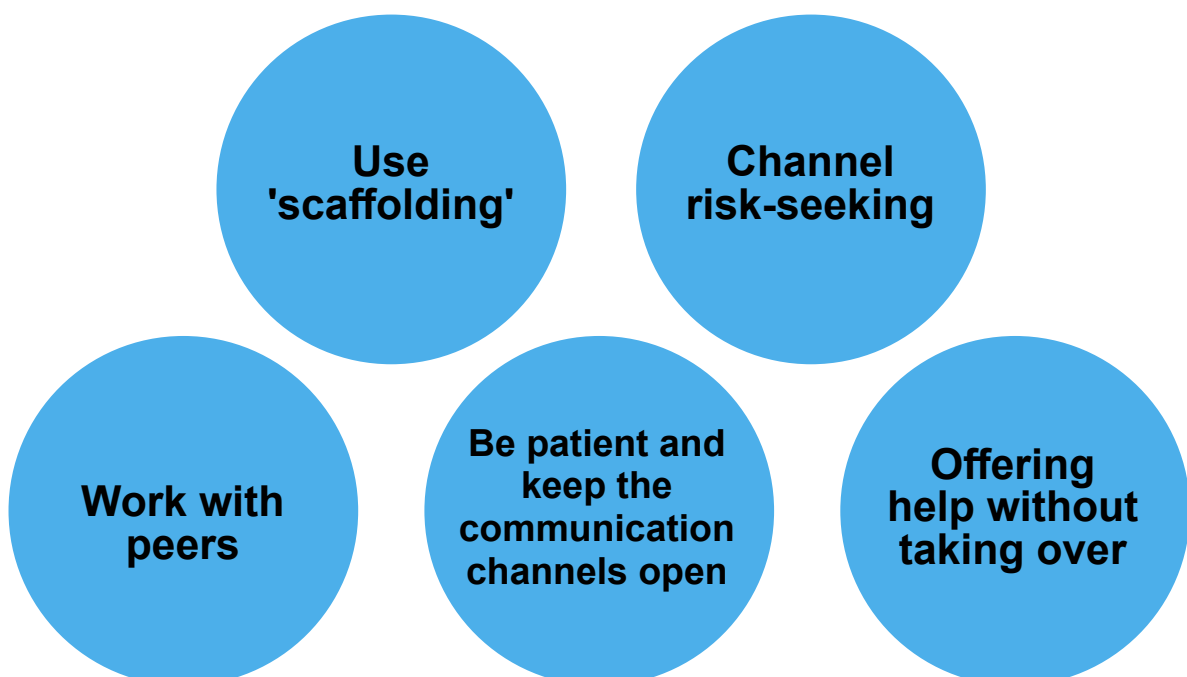
Parenting a teenager with type 1 diabetes can sometimes feel like a constant battle over reminders, routines, and responsibility. But it helps to know that many of these struggles aren't just about diabetes, they are also about normal adolescent brain development.

Our brains have a reward system, which encourages us to repeatedly do things that make us feel happy. During the teen years, the brain's reward system matures earlier than the part that handles planning and self-control. This means teens are often drawn to what feels good right now like friends, fun and freedom, even when they know the "right" thing to do. It's not always defiance, it's biology too.

At this stage, planning ahead or thinking three steps ahead may not be your child's priority. Their decisions often focus on the present rather than future consequences. For example, they might skip a bolus for lunch without considering what happens next. This can feel at odds with your priorities and expectations, especially around diabetes management, and it's normal for tension to arise. Recognise that this reflects a developmental shift as they move into adolescence, a stage where seeking independence and taking risks are part of growing up and can come into conflict with managing diabetes.

For parents, this perspective can be a relief. It shifts the focus from "my child won't listen" to "my child's brain is still learning how to prioritise." Understanding this makes it easier to structure a plan and remember connection and communication is greater than correction.

We've added some suggestions below that you could use:





- **Use ‘scaffolding’** to help your child build independence. This can be setting up routines, reminders, and support without doing everything for them. Use technology as an ally: for instance, you could use texts to communicate reminders or encouragement.

Another example of support is by getting their meter or phone out and charging it ready for when they need it for bolusing. This approach helps them take ownership while knowing support is still there. Remember to also get the buy-in from your child.

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- **Channel risk-seeking:** Encourage safe, exciting activities where they can feel both challenged and supported, such as sports, creative arts, travel, or volunteering.

These outlets can satisfy their desire for excitement while surrounding them with peers and mentors who understand and support their diabetes management.

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- **Work with peers:** Use the power of the type 1 community and friendships to reinforce good choices.

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- **Be patient and keep the communication channels open:** Independence develops gradually, not overnight. For teenagers, the strongest drive is often to fit in and feel part of their peer group. This can mean they’re less likely to show or talk about their diabetes kit openly, or they might make choices that prioritise fitting in over careful diabetes management.

While your priority is keeping them healthy and safe, their priority is being seen as normal. This difference can naturally create tension or conflict at times.

Recognising this as a normal part of adolescence can help you stay supportive and calm while continuing to guide them toward safe, independent self-care.

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- **Offering Help Without Taking Over:** There are going to be times when you need to step back in, Remember it's a shared responsibility. You might find you need to step back in, to bolus for them, charge the handset, or help manage things when life feels a bit too much. Recognise that a step back doesn't mean progress is lost. Offering a helping hand during tough times doesn't mean they're not capable; it simply shows you're there when they need it. It's key to always keep communication open with each milestone.

When you help out, your teenager may feel that you ‘get it’ more than you understand how challenging it can be. It's also a chance to show trust by letting them take the lead again when they're ready, or even teach you something about their diabetes care. It's okay for everyone, teens and adults alike, to need help from time to time.

By seeing the bigger picture, you can respond with more empathy and structure, helping your teen to grow not only in diabetes care, but in life skills that will serve them well into adulthood.

Ideas based from Laurance Steingberg's work

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